

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

“A Sanctuary of Saints”

Our Redeemer Dallas 2020

I’m afraid there’s not a lot of good news to be found in today’s readings. What we find, rather, are words of judgment. Jesus looks upon Jerusalem, the city of David, and weeps, lamenting how the Romans, in about 40 years from the time these words were spoken, “will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:44). They had, in the words of St. Paul, “stumbled over the stumbling stone” (Rom. 9:33), pursuing a righteousness that is by faith in Christ as if it were based on works of the law. And the prophet Jeremiah preaches a sermon of repentance to those who had turned the LORD’s house, the temple in Jerusalem, into a “den of robbers” (Jer. 7:11). It is here that we will spend our time this morning.

You’ll know, of course, that

Every bad guy has a hideout.

Whether it’s Jabba’s Palace, Malfoy Manor, or Barad-dûr in the land of Mordor, every villain has a place they “hole up,” not to amend their ways and their deeds, but to safely plan their next crime.

But what happens when that place is the church?

In Jeremiah’s day, there were those who sought refuge in the temple, and rightly so, for that was the place where God had promised to meet with His people. That’s where He chose to live, and so it really was “the LORD’s house” (Jer. 7:1).

But *why* they were there is another question. Perhaps they genuinely sought the forgiveness of their sins, offering the prescribed sacrifices, according to the Law of Moses; but, according to God’s own words, it was not to amend their ways and their deeds. The implication in verse 5 and following is that, even though they were no strangers to the temple, justice was still not being executed among them, sojourners, orphans, and widows were still being oppressed, innocent blood was still being shed, and false “gods,” like Baal, were still being worshipped. This was a problem. The temple was not supposed to be a place for sinners to come and be forgiven, yet go on sinning that grace may abound. As the Lord says in verses 9-11, “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are delivered!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this

house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord.” Every bad guy has a hideout. And for those living in Jerusalem at the turn of the 6th century BC, that place was the church.

But to treat God’s house this way is to betray a fundamental misunderstanding of what forgiveness is:

Forgiveness is not a license to sin.

Our Epistle this morning comes from the book of Romans, which begins by showing the true depth of our sin. There is no one who is righteous, Paul writes in chapter 3, not even one, so that under the law every mouth, every excuse that we might come up with for ourselves, is stopped. Whatever good you think you’ve done, it’s not enough. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (verse 20).

“But now,” he goes on, “now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [a pleasing sacrifice] by his blood, to be received by faith. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded...For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law...Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” (Rom. 3:23-26). We keep it. We teach it. We seek to hallow God’s name by leading holy lives according to it, as in the First Petition of the Lord’s Prayer.

What we *don’t* do is assume that because we are justified by faith we can live however we want. In fact, Paul seems to have anticipated this very argument, saying at the beginning of chapter 6, “What then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who have died to sin still live in it?” (verses 1-2). Part of being dead to sin means not obeying it anymore. It’s not just that your guilt is taken away, but there is a real expectation that you will actually want to do better.

And it’s not just Paul, but Jesus, in John chapter 5, after He’s healed a paralyzed man, says to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you” (verse 14). And later, when He meets a woman who’s been caught in adultery and refuses to condemn her, effectively pardoning her, He says to her, “Go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8:11). And so, Christ Himself communicates something of this expectation that when we are forgiven we will not willingly return to that sin, like a dog that returns to its vomit (Prov. 26:11), or a villain who returns to his life of crime, but

that we will, with the help of God, *strive against* it, not use Christ's church and His forgiveness as a way to make provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom. 13:14).

And that is always the temptation, isn't it? To think, "You know, I know this is wrong. I know God doesn't want me to do this. But, I also know that He forgives me, so let's go." But don't you see how wrong that is? Don't you see how that betrays who you are in Christ? Who God has declared you to be in your Baptism? You are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for *good* works, which God prepared beforehand, that you should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). *That's* who you are: a sinner, yes, but also a saint, a holy one of God, who is called to a life of holiness, flowing from the Gospel.

So, as Jesus also says, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He may not condone sin, but He does forgive it. There is hope for all who grieve, for the chief worship of God is to come to Him, admit your failings, and receive pardon, forgiveness, and remission of all your sins.

And when you do, you'll find that

Forgiveness is actually the freedom to obey.

It's not just about the fear of punishment, but once we've been shown our sin and received healing from it, then we learn to truly love what God loves. His Word becomes a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). Paul puts it this way in Galatians chapter 5: he says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (verse 1). You are *not* a slave. You're forgiven. You are *free*. And now, the Word says, it's time to *act* on that freedom, to amend your ways and your deeds, because God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loves us, has made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:4-5). And like the one leper who returned to give thanks (Luke 17:11-19), we return, time and again, to where our Lord has promised to meet with us, not in a temple made of stone, but in His holy Word and Sacraments. This is the time of our visitation. This is where heaven and earth meet.

And so, let us set our minds on heavenly things. Let us contemplate how we are, each of us, a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Let us not make the Lord's house into a den of robbers, but rather what it is: a sanctuary of saints, forgiven and set free to love God and each other. Together let us take refuge in the infinite mercy of God, our heavenly Father, seeking His grace for the sake of Christ, who is our righteousness. And by His grace alone we will dwell in this place, in the house of the Lord, forever.

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. How were the people in Jeremiah's day treating the temple as a "den of robbers"?
2. If we are justified by God's grace as a gift, then why shouldn't we treat forgiveness as a license to sin?
3. When have you been tempted to sin that grace may abound?
4. Explain the sermon's title, "A Sanctuary of Saints."